TRAGIC HOUSES

There's a ringing in my ears. It is a constant, irreversible screaming. It is a constant dissonance stroked by a million violins. It is shrill. It is constant.

There's a ringing in my ears that destroys all silence. For this, I am never alone. Silence is never mine. For this, some sound, some music, voice, or all-consuming thought is always with me. When I am totally alone my head is screaming inside of me.

There's a ringing in my ears, and there are spots floating through my eyesight, bouncing on your forehead when I look you in the eyes. Sometimes when I'm walking, often when I'm reading, and always when I'm driving, these spots of madness go bouncing about in my eyes and skull at chaotic intervals, changing direction whenever I blink. They remind me of those confident, secure people who look me straight in the eyes when they talk with me, regardless of the fact that I am looking elsewhere. Their eyes will just follow mine, seeking something in me. I see them often. I see them tonight.

"You play the piano very well," I remember one of them telling me.

"Oh, thank you," I said. "Do you play at all?"

"Oh, not really. I took lessons for ten years though--

practiced a half-hour every day--I don't know what it was; I never really got anywhere. I quit during college."

"That's too bad. You should've stuck with it."

"Yeah, I know that now. My father majored in music at the University of Georgia. He played the piano too. He did pretty well, I guess. No one ever told him he was Horowitz or anything, but he played in public a few times. He showed me some recital programs, once."

"What does he do now?" I asked, having some idea of what the answer would be like.

"He sells telephone systems in Baltimore."

"Oh. That's good...a good job."

"Yeah, well..." He held a suspended thought, as though he was about to toss it, but he dropped it and changed the subject. "Piano looks like fun, though. It's really weird to sit here and watch your hands just go like that. I was thinking I might learn to play this summer. I would have to start all over. Right now I can't even find middle 'A'..."

"'C'", I interrupted.

"Huh?"

"It's middle 'C'. There is no middle 'A'. At least it's not usually called that..."

"Oh, yeah...whatever that middle thing's called--I can't find it."

"That's too bad."

I had been hired by a friend of a friend to play background music at this big, expensive party. I don't make it a practice to do much socializing at these affairs, but I usually do enjoy the people.

The party was budding with intellectuals, scientists, doctors, artists--eternal over-achievers most of them. They were fun to talk to, all of them, in some way; whether they were ignorant, intelligent, talented or just boring you could always find something to talk or laugh about with them.

"What's your new book about, Fred?"

Yet they seemed stoical--wrapped up in their knowledge and their capacity to know; absorbed in everything that was happening and too attentive to miss even a word. They sat around the house a lot--thinking.

They weren't what you would call close-minded, but they had minds open only to certain things and that was, and always will be, their tragic flaw.

"I'm not quite done with the book yet. It's about how the different types of minds work and how that relates to the schoolhouse and the workplace."

"What is the main point of your book?"

"Well," he said as he plopped his napkin on his empty plate and quickly developed a distant, glassy glaze over his eyes. They were brown eyes, deep in emotion and understanding

that would easily plummet to the depths of an idea and never miss a detail. He had the eyes of a Jesuit priest, the mind of an artist and the imagination of a genius. For this, he radiated warmth and security; his head was clear and his mind open. Through his security, we learned from his house of knowledge.

"I sought to classify two types of minds--the analytical, or scientific, and the emotional. You see, the mind, if I may refer to it as one thing, works in many ways, but it is somehow either passionately or analytically that the two types of mind learn the same things. In the book, I discuss the theory of having a mind within your mind; that is, an internal brain that is used for special occasions when you want to sound smart or show off your knowledge. I think I called it the 'trivia house', or something like that. The knowledge of these two minds, while they are of equal capacity, is never equal; I compared the idea to a graph of an asymptote--the lines grow closer and closer, but they never meet. I had a whole chapter on this analogy as it applies to humanity, government, bureaucracy and human relationships."

"So how does the mind work?" someone asked.

"Well, the analytical mind will take things one step at a time. It is able to see things as they will be with better foresight than an emotional mind, which absorbs information

and ideas as a whole, and not as a collection of details. The emotional mind will memorize something and understand it later. He tends to learn things a lot more securely in the long run, understanding concepts and ideas as opposed to straight facts, but he tends not to do well in school."

"When will you be done with your book?"

"I'm not sure, yet."

He would never finish his book. He would be distracted by some other idea, become absorbed in it, and he would pursue it. He would unwittingly begin writing the closing chapter of his book, but he would suddenly hate his creation, and he would toss it into his desk drawer and forget about it. In his house lay volumes of his writings, ranging from unresearched research papers to unfinished novels to comic strips serialized only in the author's mind, and they sat there in his closet or in his room where he kept them while he went to work every day as an insurance adjuster. Oh! literacy is wonderful, isn't it?

The waiter took Fred's plate and supplied it with three messy, gnarled pieces of barbecued chicken, buttered French green beans, three rolls, a healthy portion of mashed potatoes, and a glass of champagne.

"Would you like gravy on your mashed potatoes, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you."

A napkin was lifted and a little lint and dust flew off and circled up to the ceiling. The ceiling itself was very high up, as it would need to be to provide room for the three gigantic chandeliers that hung from there. The whole room was, in fact, quite huge; I would guess that there were about four hundred people there.

These people, all these anonymous, forgotten people at these massive social gatherings represent, to me, rebellion and anger toward the society that led them to be drawn into anonymity. The worst, most frightening, thing in the world to these people is the notion or possibility of being forgotten after they die. They know, having seen others die and be forgotten, that they too will be forgotten after they die. But they ignore this and continue doing what those who have died did. They have a really good time, too--to spite the people who will be remembered when they die.

They don't talk too much about immortality at these parties. They try not to think about it either.

I returned to the rickety Steinway grand piano in the corner of the room. It was elevated on a platform about four feet off the ground. There were microphones around it so that party-goer number four hundred at the opposite end of the universe could hear me over some loudspeakers. I played a

Schubert Impromptu, and talked to a few more people. Some people were still eating dinner. The plates were so steamy and hot that the mist from them rose straight from the plate to the ceiling. From a distance it looked like the tables themselves were steaming. At the proper angle I could see steam puffing out of someone's ears, or off his head, or from his neck.

In a cynical way, I loved listening to the intensity with which the dinnertime conversations were conducted. Sometimes the only difference between hearing these people talk and hearing high school girls gossip was the manner of exchange among the speakers.

"Mr. Everwood was run over two nights ago by someone in a VW bug," said John Bay.

"Didn't you see it happen?" asked someone.

"Yes, Wendy and I were going home after the concert when we saw Mr. Everwood and his broken down car on the interstate. Naturally, we stopped to help, but as we were getting out of our car, a yellow Volkswagen zoomed out of nowhere and creamed him. It was a terrible sight."

"Is he all right?"

"I don't really know. He didn't seem to be that badly hurt, but I'm sure he broke a leg. He's in the hospital."

"Fred, your cousin, Amy, owns a yellow Volkswagen, doesn't

she?" asked Mr. King.

"Yes, I guess she does. Please, though, her name isn't 'Amy', it's 'Ami', as in 'grammy'."

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. She just bought the car last summer. It was brand new, and it still seems to be that way. She's been in Miami all week."

"Oh, I hate that town," commented some unidentified voice. "How does she like it?"

"She might buy a house there."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. She seems to be enjoying herself, whatever that means."

"Oh, Fred, that's what I like about you; you're so unintentionally cynical at times!" Mrs. Barber cut in.

"Well, what can I say?"

"There you go again! I just love it, that's all! 'What can I say?' That's so funny! Well...okay. You can say why you didn't go to Miami with your cousin."

"Miami, Florida? Never would. I was there."

"Huh?"

"Ami and I went to Miami last year and I hated it. There were too many Florida crackers and hicks having their redneck fun in their pick-up trucks on the beach; it made me sick,

especially when Ami started getting into it."

"Oh."

The smalltalk, doubletalk, and meaningless, forgettable trivia floated into the air throughout the night. Some of them would spit when they spoke, sending little clouds of mist up to the ceiling. Most of them were more controlled than to spit all over the place, but Jennifer King, a long-time friend of mine, came to talk with me in the middle of the Pavane for a Dead Princess, and she had no inhibitions about slobbering on herself and others.

As we spoke, I made her laugh once, and she spat her drink out into a fine mist, as others had done. No one else did it quite as much as she, however.

"Ladies and gentlemen..." Mr. Simonds began. "May I have your attention, please?" The muttering voices quickly disappeared.

Peter Simonds stood behind a podium which was perched at the middle of a very long table, where all the honored, richest guests sat. The table was raised on a platform about six feet off the ground and decorated with red and blue flowers in china vases and namecards for all those seated at the table. From where I was seated, Peter Simonds was untouchable to me. His image was tiny, and I gave up trying to figure out what he looked like.

He was the appropriate host--well-mannered, rich, very literate and, from what I had heard from his close friends, a true genius. Unfortunately, he was shy about his genius, and he rarely shared it. He possessed that frame of mind we all possess just as we are about to fall asleep--open, vulnerable, and capable of merging everything around us into one dream. For this, his presence was treasured. For this, he had many impersonators, and his dreams lived on through them.

"I'm very glad that so many of you could make it here tonight," he said. "We have gathered here for a very special night, indeed. Tonight marks..."

His words resonated with a vibrant fullness throughout the room as if some other man in the room or in another room was speaking these same exact words.

"I am very pleased, now, to introduce to you the editor of the Oxford Universal Dictionary of the English language, Mr. Charles Talbut Onions."

As Mr. Onions approached the podium, all was silent. I heard a distant orchestra miles and miles away, screeching louder than any man had ever known possible. He spoke, at last.

"I am very pleased to be here this evening. It thrills me greatly to announce the near completion of the ninety-seventh edition of The Oxford Universal Dictionary."

The audience burst into unrestrainable peals of hysterical laughter. John Bay spit his champagne out into a cloud in front of him. Mrs. Barber, who was already in tears with laughter, had to lend Jennifer King her handkerchief to blow her nose into, because her mouth was full when she suddenly started laughing. Jennifer was certainly laughing, spitting and wheezing the hardest and loudest of anyone else at the table.

"We have added dozens of new words, many of them technical terms, which I'm sure many of you will find quite useful."

"All of these additions to the English vocabulary are certain to enhance your use of the language and make you more aware of the ability language has to communicate ideas and facts. Thank you for your attention."

The crowd howled almost in unison as the speaker returned to his seat. Slowly, the laughter ceased and Mr. Simonds got the party going again.

I quickly returned to my place at the piano and played with unusual abandonment and intensity; I succeeded in closing out the murmurings of the crowd around me.

There was a cloud over the evening, and I felt it closing in on me and on the people who made it. It shook us all, I think. It made us think about ourselves and our places in

our minds. There was certainly a cloud over us all for the rest of the evening, and the rest of our lives. It made me play the piano. It made others deliver mail. It made some writers. It made still others telephone salesmen. It made us all build houses.

"Mark," said a voice from outside a dream, "you can stop playing now."

I looked up; everyone was gone except for myself and the host, Peter Simonds. I didn't know him very well at all, having had only two short telephone conversations with him to set up the present engagement, but I felt myself being drawn into his deep, knowing eyes as a child is drawn into magic.

"Everyone's gone, Mark," he said. "Here's your check. You played very well; I got a lot of good comments."

I looked across the dozens of tables and acres of floor that were the grounds for this huge party. It seemed exhausted to me, as though everything it had in it had been consumed. I looked at Peter Simonds, and he was staring at my eyes intently, because he knew what I was thinking.

"Peter," I said.

"Yes."

"There's this...there's a...it's...uh..."

The room was totally silent.

"There's a ringing in my ears...it never seems to quit. Whenever it's quiet, my head screams its loudest. I can't do anything about it. Do you know if I can?" I looked him right in the eyes, where a spot bounced spastically; it jumped up and down on his forehead.

"It's called tinnitus."

"There are those spots in my eyes, too. They're everywhere, sometimes. They make me crazy, Pete."

"They're called phosphenes."

I abhorred his knowledge for an instant--this man was no genius!

But then I was drawn into his eyes.

A spot came across his eye. It bounced out of his eye and onto the floor. I looked at him. He was staring at me, still. He inhaled deeply through his cigarette, sent the smoke up to the ceiling, and left me there.

I picked up his phosphene and put it in my pocket. Then I played a chord, and left.

In the parking lot outside the place, I fumbled for the right key to the car door.

"Wasn't that speaker just the biggest bore?" a clarion voice uttered to other complacent clarion voices. "Who was that, anyway?"

"Y'know, I don't remember."
"No? I don't think I do, either."

"Well, what does it matter, right? He won't remember us."

"Exactly!"

"To mortality!" a male voice boomed.

"To mortality!" they all shouted.

They danced freely across the vast parking lot and through the park, kicking their feet and clapping their hands and yelling. How tiresome it is when old people try to be young.

They got into a luxurious black Jaguar and they were swallowed up by the foggy night. I left.

I drove routinely, whistling tunes and humming melodies and hearing the radio, until I finally arrived home. It felt safe to be back at my house again.

I turned the car off in the garage. The silence made me mad. My ears, my brain, my soul screamed at me. I hit the steering wheel once, then I cried.

It was over, for me. I would be remembered, now.